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INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AF DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY COLLECTIVE
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GABORONE 000626

SENSITIVE
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STATE FOR AF/S, AF/EPS, EEB, OES

E.O 12958: N/A

TAGS: [ECON](#) [ETRD](#) [SENV](#) [PGOV](#) [EAIR](#) [SCUL](#) [BC](#)

SUBJECT: PRESIDENT TAKES ACTIVE INTEREST IN TOURISM SECTOR

1. (U) SUMMARY: Botswana's 2009 "Tourism Pitso" (an annual seminar for government and tourism operators) was attended by many high level government officials, including H.E. President Ian Khama. The President participated in the conference for over two and a half hours, highlighting the importance he places on Botswana's tourism sector and environmental conservation. The conference reviewed findings of a 2009 tourism competitiveness report and Botswana's strengths and weaknesses within the sector. During the conference the GOB committed to improving local community opportunities in tourism and to expanding Botswana's infrastructure that supports tourism. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) With over 400 people in attendance, the 2009 Tourism Pitso was graced by the H.E. President Ian Khama and other dignitaries, including the Ministers of Tourism, Labor & Home Affairs, Local Government and Works & Transport; Members of Parliament; Chief Executive Officers from various parastatals and tourism operators. Though President Khama generally makes only short, ceremonial appearances at this type of event, he spent over two and a half hours at this seminar, and in addition to giving brief remarks, he participated in the discussions as part of a panel, even responding to many audience questions.

3. (U) Botswana's "Tourism Pitso" is an industry seminar that was first hosted in 2006 by the Honorable Minister of Tourism Mr. Kitso Mokaila. "Pitso," which means "a call" in Setswana, has become an annual event and is indeed a call for the Ministry of Tourism and the private sector to cultivate a true and meaningful collaboration between them. The GOB's strategic plan within the tourism sector leans heavily towards promotion of tourism investment opportunities and promotion and marketing of the tourism sector as a whole to ensure the businesses remains viable. Currently tourism revenues make up approximately 10 percent of Botswana's GDP. The theme of this year's seminar was "Tourism Responding to Challenges in the Global Market".

4. (U) The seminar participants reviewed "Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2009 - A Focus on Botswana Performance," which was compiled by the Botswana National Productivity Centre (BNPC). According to the report, the Travel and Tourism (T & T) index indicates that there has been very little improvement from 2008 to 2009 within the tourism industry in Botswana. In the index, Botswana ranked very low in the areas of: business environment; infrastructure; and human, cultural and natural resources. Botswana received moderate marks for price competitiveness. The 2009 T & T international ranking for Botswana is 79 out of 133 countries. However, Botswana ranks number three within the region after Mauritius and South Africa.

5. (U) The report identified strengths and weaknesses within the tourism sector. Botswana's strengths include its favorable tax regime and generally low prices as well as its beautiful natural parks. Additionally, the country's parks, with their large tracts of nationally protected land, have achieved international acclaim for their beauty, rich flora and fauna and lack of environmental damage.

The report identified a number of weaknesses within the industry, including: a limited qualified labor pool; lack of "open" air service agreements; underdeveloped transport and tourism infrastructure; long business start-up times; and a policy regime that is not conducive to the development of the sector. In addition to these weaknesses, major concerns voiced at the meeting centered on a poor working environment, poor transport infrastructure, few job openings and poor remuneration (especially for locals). Though there are a good number of Botswana graduate students in tourism studies, many of them do not enter the tourism sector after graduation, but opt to work in other sectors citing unattractive employment packages and an unwillingness to work in remote areas away from their families.

¶6. (U) There are few tertiary educational institutions in Botswana that offer tourism programs. The University of Botswana has recently introduced some tourism courses, however most training is still done outside the country - particularly in neighboring South Africa. According to the Botswana Tourism Board (BTB) training facilities for eco-tourism are not yet up to standard and they are still conducting a study on the Eco-Certification systems.

¶7. (U) The GOB's main focus is on involving local communities in tourism, reducing the time it takes to start doing business, as well as improving both the transport and tourism infrastructure. Under the GOB's latest National Development Plan (NDP-10), the Ministry of Works and Transport intends to upgrade a number of roads and some airstrips, and all accommodation facilities registered under the Ministry of Tourism are now going to be graded. (Note: Econoff spoke separately to officials at Botswana's Civil Aviation Authority and learned that some of the promised air strip improvements will be delayed due to the economic crisis. End Note.)

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¶8. (SBU) COMMENT: Botswana's tourism sector is an important source of non-mining revenues and offers continued potential for economic growth and diversification. However, there is still room for improved and diversified infrastructure and additional investment in the sector. It is clear that the GOB, and President Khama in particular, place high importance on the growth of the tourism sector, as evidenced by President Khama spending over two hours at the conference. The President rarely commits so much time to any single event. Additionally, Khama's animated participation and seeming ease while answering audience questions shows that he is well briefed, comfortable, and engaged with issues related to tourism, especially environmental conservation - an issue especially close to his heart. END COMMENT.

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